FOLLOW ME
Matthew 4:12-23
January 22, 1978

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

The nation paused last week to pay final respects to a United States Senator, a former Vice-President, a controversial politician whose energy on behalf of his causes was legendary. Hubert Humphrey died while he was very much involved in the business of living. His funeral, I thought, was quietly remarkable. The minister, the Reverend Calvin Didier, revealed that someone had asked the Senator if he planned to resign from some of his major responsibilities because of his health. He responded that he not only wasn't about to resign from anything, he was considering joining a few groups. He knew the brutal, unvarnished reality of his condition: he knew that he could not win his last battle. What that meant to him and his family in the quiet, personal hours, we will never know. What he did about it, however, was put on a suit and tie and fly back to Washington and get on with the business of living and fighting. Regardless of our opinion of Senator Humphrey's political positions, in dying he gave a great gift to anyone who could see and hear; namely, a lesson in living.

As I watched the news last week and listened to his colleagues, many of them adversaries, testify to that great gift, I recalled a quotation which I read recently and used from this pulpit just four weeks ago. It was George Bernard Shaw's Credo, adopted as his own by Bertrand Russell:

> "This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy." (Alistaire Cooke, Six Men, p.172).

That, it seemed to me, fit Senator Humphrey. It also describes Christian Faith at its best.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ offers true joy in life to anyone who will hear and respond. It is called salvation and the New Testament couches the offer in two statements - an announcement and a command. The announcement is that God loves you: He always has and He always will. There is nothing in life that can separate you from His love, not even death: therefore you are saved - safe from the anxieties and fears that are part of the human condition. The command is "Follow me". Follow Jesus Christ and you will be saved; - saved from boredom, meaninglessness, cynicism, saved by the granting of a mighty cause for which you can live and die. Both are necessary words. The Gospel is distorted when one outweighs the other. Both are saving words: the Good News of God's love and the call to discipleship are the complementary parts of our faith - but if the New Testament is to be trusted the call to discipleship,to get up and follow, is where it begins in the context of real life.

At least that's the way it was for those first men who were to be known as disciples. History has not been terribly fair to them, really. For centuries they were regarded as "Super Christians" with remarkable powers: they became Saints, in the worst sense of the word. Churches were named for them and in those churches they stood forever enshrined in stained glass. They were larger than life, and then the skepticism of the 1960's and 70's tried to demythologize them. Having

worshipped them for so many centuries our age rather enjoyed bringing them down to size. We're willing, for instance, to look at the complexity of a Judas, the total humanity of Peter, the sometimes pettiness of John. Some efforts go even further. Tim Rice and Lloyd Webber tried desperately to demonstrate their humanity throughout "Jesus Christ Superstar", sometimes brilliantly, and sometimes foolishly. At the Last Supper, for instance, while Jesus is engaged in a passionate discourse with Judas they sound boozy and insensitive:

> "Look at all my trials and tribulations
> Sinking in a gentle pool of wine.
> What's that in the bread, it's gone to my head
> Till this morning is this evening life is fine.
> Always hoped that I'd be an Apostle
> Knew that I would make it if I tried
> Then when we retire we can write the gospels
> So they'll all talk about us when we've died."

Somewhere between the two extremes, the stained glass saints and the twelve drunks in the Rock Opera, is the truth: somewhere near the point of normal humanity. They were just men, which is both a mundane and remarkable observation. They were disciples, not because they were saintly in behavior, nor astute theologically, nor zealous in their piety: but because when Jesus of Nazareth said to them, "Follow me", they got up and did just that.

When we try to interject ourselves into their situation we have difficulty taking very seriously what they did. Our first reaction would be that the man was a religious freak and we would probably give Him about as much attention as we do the earnest young people in beards and sandles who accost us in airport lobbies. Assuming that somehow we proceeded beyond that initial reaction we would want, next, the answers to some very fundamental questions: "Who is this who is asking me to follow? Where does He intend to lead me?" Prudent, common sense questions, conspicuously absent from the text.

The problem is that we have been schooled to regard religious faith as a matter of understanding. Our almost automatic definition of Christianity is that body of doctrine contained in the Creeds of the Church. None of us is disposed not to follow Jesus Christ. It's just that we want to be convinced first: we want to build up a file of persuasive data, a reservoir of faith before we get up from our mats and follow into an unknown future. And occasionally we need reminding that the New Testament describes that sequence in precisely opposite terms. Listen to Leslie Weatherhead on the subject:

> "I believe passionately that Christianity is a way of life, not a theological system with which one must be in intellectual agreement. I feel that Christ would admit into discipleship anyone who sincerely desired to follow him, and allow that disciple to make his creed out of his experience." (The Christian Agnostic, p.16).

And later, talking about the relationship of theology to discipleship, he said it again: "Christ called his disciples to follow him, to enter into a friendship with him. As their experience deepened certain great truths were born in their minds from observation, meditation, discussion and experience. These truths became their creeds, but they were not imposed on them by Christ or by the fellowship as a condition of belonging." (p.31).

The power of the new evangelicalism is precisely at this point. The evangelical sees the Gospel clearly - as Jesus Christ calling people to follow in lives of commitment, in a way that Presbyterians seem unable to do. It's almost as if we have been innoculated with a little religion and we are thereby immune from the real thing. We've gone to Sunday School as youngsters, learned a few Bible verses, the Apostles' Creed and several hymns. We attend church on occasion, make a pledge, and spend a whole lifetime waiting for faith to happen to us, or wondering what in the world has got into "good old Joe" who is suddenly talking about nothing but his Lord. A careful reading of the text shows what's wrong. People follow Jesus first; faith, belief, theology - are added later. I keep always close at hand Albert Schweitzer's famous quote with which he concluded his very scholarly work, The Quest for the Historical Jesus. It's on the front of the bulletin: "He comes to us as one unknown...and says 'Follow me' - and to those who obey...he will reveal himself...and they shall learn in their experience who he is."

Faith, in the Bible at least, is not having all the answers. In fact, it has almost nothing to do with answers. Rather faith, in the Bible, is consistently described as getting up and following the call of God without knowing where you are going, or who exactly is doing the calling. It is acting without the guarantees you and I want to have before we move a muscle. The irony - and tragedy - is that we will not know, we will not have faith, until we follow. Rollo May observed: "If I do not will something, I could never know it." (Love and Will, p. 230). And someone once remarked to the great philosopher Pascal, "I wish I had your creed, then I would live your life," to which Pascal responded, "Live my life and you will have my creed."

Our personhood depends on our being willing to make difficult decisions and take concrete action. We become persons when we make commitments to something other than ourselves and then passionately follow where those commitments lead with everything in us. Hubert Humphrey was an eloquent example of that: a man fully alive until the moment he died. Shakespeare's most familiar line, out of Hamlet, "To be, or not to be: that is the question," speaks the same truth. And we are learning, even in the area of mental health, that people begin to feel better and be better when they make decisions and change their behavior, instead of wallowing in the guilt and hurt of the past. Reality Therapy, one of the new psychiatric alternatives, places its emphasis on the future, not past. Its founder, William Glasser, writes, "Without denying that the patient had an unsatisfactory past, we find that to look for what went wrong does not help him. What good comes from discovering that you are afraid to assert yourself because you had a domineering father? Both patient and therapist can be aware of this historical occurrence; they can discuss it in all its ramifications for years, but the knowledge will not help the patient assert himself now." (See E. Campbell, Locked in a Room with Open Doors, p.31).

There is something about our humanity which becomes more human, more noble, more authentic, when we decide to be, when we make deep commitments and covenant to live for them.

But there is much about our life,and the predominant life style of our culture, that mitigates against it. Two motifs, in particular, stand out: the pursuit of pleasure and apathy, the inclination away from commitment to anything of substance. The latest in sociological trends has become something called the "new narcissism", and obsessive concentration on self: self-identity, self-realization, self-actualization. My happiness, my gratification, my satisfaction becomes my

priority - my religion. And if it conflicts with other commitments or relationships, they must be sacrificed on the altar of self. Hedonism, as a religion, went out with the Greeks, but it has reappeared in our day disguised as the simple gospel of Hugh Heffner: "if it feels good, do it." It is defended seriously by people who should know better. It's all right, we are told, to give yourself to the goal of being happy.

Trouble is - it doesn't work, and never has. In a superb little paragraph on human sexuality Victor Frankl, Austrian psychiatrist, writes: "Primarily and normally man does not seek pleasure: instead, pleasure - or, for that matter, happiness - is the side effect of living out the self-transcendence of existence. Once one has served a cause or is involved in loving another human being, happiness occurs by itself. The will to pleasure, however, contradicts and defeats itself. For pleasure and happiness are by-products. Happiness must ensue. It cannot be pursued. It is the very pursuit of happiness that thwarts happiness." (The Unconscious God, p.84-85).

The Gospel of Jesus Christ promises happiness - in its only, real form - as a by-product of serving a great cause. It was Chesterton, I believe, who remarked dryly that "Christianity had never been tried and found wanting. He just hadn't been tried."

The second cultural motif which mitigates against the New Testament definition of faith is detachment, cool non-involvement, non-commitment. It is fashionable not to get "hot" about anything, not to care too deeply, not to throw too much into any fight. We have learned - in parenting, politics, in love, that deep commitments can be costly and disappointing and painful. Someone has written a little poem about the final result of this dynamic, when played out to its end:

> 'Some men die by shrapnel,
> Some go down in flames
> And some men die of boredom
> At play at little games."

Who among us wouldn't give anything for a cause big enough to live and die for? Who isn't anxious to know that life adds up to something besides the frantic, twenty-four hour a day struggle to earn enough money to buy that illusive security, or to finance a vacation long enough so that we can rejoin the struggle with renewed vigor?

And to each of us - regardless of who we are - Jesus says simply - "Follow me",

What does it require? The courage, first to be a person: to say "yes": to commit and give and decide. And second, it requires the willingness to leave our nets behind. That's how it was for them, after all. Matthew records it for the edification of any reader capable of being astounded; "They left their nets and followed him."

The Church presumes too much, I believe, when it tries to identify the nets. You know what they are for you. I know what mine are. There was a delightful story in the Washington Post some time ago about the maiden voyage of a cruise ship on the Potomac. The passenger list was a veritable "Who's Who" of Washington

society. It was a hot and humid day and at one point some of the passengers removed their shoes and socks. In the crowd a man accidently kicked overboard one of the socks of a ranking government official. Without even thinking about it the official did the truly logical thing: he threw the other sock in the river. (See Hoover Rupert in The Outlook, 11/7/77). Most of us would not have done that - we would have brought the now useless sock home and kept it in the drawer for at least a year.

Christian Faith is like that. It requires the courage and grace to throw away the useless sock; to walk away from whatever stands in the path of following Jesus Christ. In William Faulkner's novel The Reivers, there is a line that goes: "You've got to say goodbye to some things you know in order to say hello to some things you don't." (Rupert, Ibid.).

So, for each of us, the call to discipleship is a call to leave our nets behind: to say goodbye to an old life in order to discover new life.

Jesus Christ calls each of us to follow. He does not call us to imitate Him slavishly. He does not call every person to be a missionary or a minister. He calls each to follow. He calls you and me to follow - where we are now, in the context of our lives.

He promised those humble fishermen that He would make them into fishers of men. He promises us that in following Him we will become everything we were created to be: that in His service we will find that illusive selfhood, that fulfillment and peace and happiness for which we are looking. And something else as well - we will find one day that in following Him, we have found faith.

Amen.

God our Father, may we hear again the clear call to discipleship. Give us courage to follow, to leave our nets behind and to live new lives as disciples of Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord.

Amen.